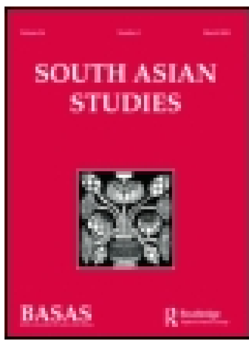

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The Tale of the Tailor: Munshi Mohammad Meherullah and Muslim–Christian Apologetics in Bengal, 1885–1907

Mou Banerjee*

Department of History, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

Rural Muslim atrap communities in the eastern part of the colonial Bengal Presidency were the target demographic ofChristian conversion efforts in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Debates (bahas) between Muslim preachers and Christian missionaries, as well as religious meetings (waz mahfils), characterized these apologetics. Disseminated through street-market chapbooks in Musalmani-Bengali or dobashi Bengali, such polemics translated the cultural valences of Christianity and Islam both as personal faith and as communitarian identifying markers. In this paper, I analyze a selection of such pamphlets authored by an itinerant tailor called Munshi Meherullah, who spearheaded the atrap Bengali reaction against missionary efforts. Meherullah understood that the theological debates between Christian missionaries and Muslim alims was colonially and racially inflected and pre-determined, and the very act of engagement in apologetics was merely a performance of social, racial and theological superiority. As this paper exhibits, Meherullah's distinctive approach towards social reform, religion and religious identity played a very important role in defining the parameters of being a good Bengali Muslim. Religious conversion, as a result of his intervention, became a techne, a phronetic device that operated in excess of the real boundaries of its perceived threats, to enable self-examination and analysis of their immediate social milieu for Bengal's Muslims, in order to resist colonial religious and political subordination.

Keywords: Christianity; Islam; evangelism; conversions; apologetics; Bengal; British India

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Introduction

On 7 June 1907, a forty-five-year-old tailor, Meherullah, died of complications arising from pneumonia in a small village called Chatiantala, on the banks of the river Bhairab, in Jessore. Jessore was, as L. S. S. O'Malley put it, a 'land of moribund rivers and obstructed drainage, notoriously unhealthy, with fever silently and relentlessly at work, destroying many, and sapping the vitality of the survivors and reducing their fecundity'.[1] In the wet, humid, and marshy environs of riverine eastern Bengal, such deaths were not uncommon. What can the life of a tailor illuminate for us about the spaces and politics of religion and language, or legitimacy of belonging and identity, in Bengal of the late nineteenth century? In the small, unremarkable tragedies of rural peasant life, this could have been an ordinary chapter and Meherullah's memory lost to the archives of history. The extraordinary qualities of Meherullah and his unlikely influence on Bengali-Muslim society make this story more complicated. The ripples of dismay at Meherullah's demise spread from Jessore to Dhaka and even to Calcutta. The premier Bengali-Muslim weekly periodical, *Mihir-o-Sudhakar*, published from 42 Metcalf Street in Bowbazar by Sheikh Abdur Rahim, led the chorus of grief-stricken obituaries. A few days after Meherullah's death, the periodical printed a notice of death that in fact amounted to a dirge about the fate of the subaltern Bengali-Muslim society of Bengal, particularly east Bengal:

> The political and religious world of Bengali Muslims is shrouded in great darkness. The person who dedicated his life to the uplift and reform of religion and society and infused a new life in Bengali Muslims, that preacher of the true values of Islam, Munshi Mohammad Meherullah, alas, is no more. […] The Christian *padris* shook in fear when they heard him defend Islam. His advice brought many Christian converts back into the fold.[2]

Other important Bengali-Muslim periodicals and newspapers echoed the *Mihir-o-Sudhakar*. The *Soltan* said, 'All hope of reforming a fallen society and religion has seemingly ended! The sleeping Bengali Muslims are surrounded by profound darkness.' The *Islam Pracharak*, published by a few members of the *Sudhakar* group, as well as the *Moslem Suhrid*(*Friend of Muslims*) emphasized the social loss Meherullah's death had caused.[3]

There are three issues that are fairly evident from the tone and content of the obituaries, even in their surviving truncated and excerpted forms. First, the

*Email: moubanerjee@fas.harvard.edu

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tailor Munshi Meherullah had transcended his very humble origins to occupy the role of reformer and social conscience for a large section of Bengali Muslims, across the spectrum of class and sectarian differences, from the plebeian *atrap* to the aristocratic *ashraf*.[4] In his self-appointed role as a seeker to the question of who was a true Muslim in rural Bengal, Meherullah's acceptability as a spokesman for the religious, political, and social aspirations and duties of Bengali Muslims was acknowledged by the centres of high intellectual exchange through the print medium. These patrons included, for example, the *Sudhakar* group in Calcutta, who also acted as his publicists. These central nodes of exchange of information also aided in disseminating his opinions and views, especially to the educated *ashraf* or elite aristocratic Muslims of Dhaka and Calcutta, by allowing him the space to write and contest Christian evangelical polemics in the pages of fairly widely subscribed periodicals and pamphlets. His oratorical powers were obviously exceptional since they are mentioned by every obituary – the power of the spoken word, and his ability to yield it precisely for the intended audience, helped him to appeal to the large sections of illiterate or literacy-aware peasant Muslim communities, spread in the remote rural areas of deltaic Bengal, who would gather by the thousands to hear him give speeches at the *waz-mahfils* or engage Christian missionaries in debate in deeply antagonistic but entertaining *bahas*'es.[5]

This form of apologetics, religious in tone, but social in content and purpose, part written and part oral, is characteristic of what C. A. Bayly referred to as the Indian ecumene. In this case, it was a distinct Bengali-Muslim ecumene, one that finds very little mention or discussion in the predominant Hindu-Brahmo elite intellectual discourse that flourished in and around the metropole of Calcutta.[6] The pamphlets written by Meherullah that survive often seem to be elaborations of his speeches. These were printed in very few numbers (copies are rare) and were usually cheap. In the rare printed examples that I have found apart from mentions in his biographies, the language of Meherullah's pamphlets is idiomatic, rustic, playful, indebted to genres like poems, folk-songs, folk-tales and parables, and in general easy to memorize and recite.[7] In erstwhile rural Bengal, even if the rate of literacy was low, it required only one literate person who could read the text to a community of avid listeners, who would then orally pass around the message and argument of the text to a wider community. Thus, exchange of information and religious politics would find a much larger audience than could be numerically verified by tallying literacy rates. The transmission of Mir Mosharraf Hossein's novel trilogy, *Bishad-Sindhu* (*Ocean of Sorrows*), is a case in point, as is also discussed later in this paper. The novel trilogy was memorized, transmuted into folk-songs and rhymes and sung as devotional music in most rural areas of wider Bengal. Abul Bashar, writing of his childhood in rural Murshidabad in the middle of the twentieth century, speaks of a largely illiterate populace listening to the novel being read and then sung aloud in communal gatherings. In Bashar's case, the singer was a poor and semi-literate religious officiant, Isha Haque, singing songs that made Bashar's grandmother and aunt weep at the tragedy of Hasan and Hossein during Muharram, songs that had travelled around literacy-aware Bengali-Muslim society for more than half a century.[8] It is not unreasonable to conjecture that such communities of listeners, bound by the spell of Meherullah's oratory, in a shared empathetic space of imagined belonging, existed in rural eastern Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The second striking element in all the obituaries is the liberal use of phrases that denote death, darkness, sleep. There was a clear sense, across the spectrum of Bengali-Muslim society, that there was social, religious, and political stagnation from within and without. The *Islam Pracharak* of August 1891 proclaimed, 'The Christian preachers have rendered the situation in Jessore utterly chaotic – in the districts of Nadia and Jessore innumerable illiterate poor peasants have converted to Christianity.'[9] Poverty and illiteracy made the Muslim peasantry particularly vulnerable to the influences of both fake religious preceptors like fakirs as well as Christian missionaries who rhetorically vilified both Islam and Prophet Muhammad. In such a situation, Meherullah reminded Bengali Muslims of their true faith and guided them away from sacrilegious practices which were often seen to be an unhealthy syncretic admixture of Hindu rituals in Musalman customs. One such example was the prohibition on widow remarriage in *ashraf* families, especially those purporting to be Sayyids, Sheikhs, and Khondkars – this was seen by Meherullah and other reformers as un-Islamic and an import from high-caste Hindu practices.[10] When Meherullah was told by elite Muslims that the customary practices of high-born members of the *ashraf* class regarding widow remarriage could not be interfered with, he reprimanded them by saying that the Prophet had taken a widow for his first wife, and asked, 'Who among us is more learned than the Prophet?'[11] Maulana Hafez Ahmed wrote in the same vein in the June 1891 edition of the *Islam Pracharak*, 'Most of the Muslims of Bengal discarded the practices of *namaz* and *roza*, and entirely busied themselves in the rituals of Manasa-puja, Shitala-puja, Satya-Pir'er puja, animal sacrifice during the worship of Kali and so on.' The situation had not changed thirty years later – the eminent Bengali

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poet Ismail Hossein Shiraji wrote in complete exasperation in the *Soltan* of September 1923, 'The effects of Hindu-ritualism are very strong on every class of Bengali Muslims barring the *Karikars*. In many places Musalmans vow sacrifices to the goddess Kali on the fulfillment of their wishes. On the day of Lakshmi-puja, most Muslim women conduct all rituals except that of direct idol-worship.'[12] In such a situation, preachers like Meherullah were worried about the souls and identities of Bengali Muslims. Meherullah asked them to be better Muslims by being stronger, more pious, and more orthodox in observing prayers and fasting.

The third issue in the obituaries was that of charity, and the form that charity could and should take in order to benefit the oppressed rural Muslim peasantry. Meherullah seemed to have made the dissemination of education and debt freedom his most important agendas – vital for the uplift of a perpetually debt-ridden, illiterate, rural peasant population. His relentless apologetics against Christian evangelism stemmed from the recognition that in many cases, the wretched conditions of existence in rural Bengal, the lack of medical care, access to education or employment, apart from the often-unprofitable business of agriculture that was at the mercy of moneylenders and erratic weather, made it easier for the missionaries to influence people by promising material benefits. The missionaries did this most visibly through their humanitarian efforts in setting up educational institutions and hospitals. Meherullah recognized and was deeply conscious of the material conditions of performance of faith, and was also aware that this could be exploited in his preferred form of social activism and religious reform. He wrote, 'Enchanted by the imaginary idea that Christianity was the true religion, recently many thoughtless Musalmans have gone ahead and had their names recorded in the registers of Christian Missions, and thus have now a share of free bread.'[13] His opinion was a common one, as evidenced by a folk-song from Nadia recorded by his disciple Jamiruddin's biographer:

> নদীয়া জেলার আজি বেরাদর'গন। Look, brothers from Nadia,
>
> যত কেরেস্তান লোগ কর দরশন। Look at all these Christian people!
>
> বাপদাদা তাহাদের আকালের বারে। Their forefathers, during the famine,
>
> পেটের দায়েতে মজে যীশু মন্তরে। Compelled by hunger sang Jesus's praise![14]

For Meherullah and the Bengali-Muslim intelligentsia at large, it was this understanding of the materiality of religious faith and religious identity that determined their stance on Bengali Muslims, especially of the non-elite Muslim peasantry of east Bengal.

'In Times of Famines Praise Jesus': The Spaces and Environs of *Dobashi*-Bengali Apologetics

The regions of Jessore – Meherullah's home – as well as the adjacent district of Nadia suffered from a series of natural calamities, including three famines between 1866 and 1896. There was terrible flooding in Nadia and Meherpur in 1871, 1885, and 1890. The *Nadia District Gazetteer* mentions that the population had decreased by more than 1 per cent in 1891 due to the distress and suffering caused by the flooding. Malaria was endemic. The hospital at Meherpur (attended by 8120 out-patients and 59 in-patients), a dispensary at Shikarpur (attended by 5644 out-patients), and a dispensary for women and children at Ratnapur were maintained by the Church of England Zenana Mission Society, aided by the District Board.[15] The dispensary at Ranaghat was established by a retired Bengal civilian, James Monroe, and maintained by the Church Missionary Society.[16] Though the ratio of Muslims to Hindus was six–four in 1891, the ratio of Muslim boys to Hindu boys in school was only one–two.[17]

Abul Ahsan Chaudhuri, the biographer of Sheikh Jamiruddin, Meherullah's disciple (who before his re-conversion was known as Reverend John Jamiruddin), pointed out that the decades-long vicious cycle of epidemics, flooding, famines, and the unsettled agricultural ecosystem in the aftermath of the indigo troubles, led to population decline and partial breakdown of socio-economic infrastructure in Nadia, Jessore, and the surrounding areas.[18] The lack of education, a tattered rural economy, and repeated natural calamities, combined with the zealous charitable efforts of Christian missions and evangelically-minded colonial administrators, meant that this region became one of the only places in Bengal other than 24 Parganas to evince some success in non-elite Christian conversions.[19] In 1872, Hindus made up 45.3 per cent of the population, while Muslims constituted 54.3 per cent, with the rest being made up of Baishnabs, Hadis, and other sects. As the *District Gazetteer* notes, by the 1901 census, the total number of Christians was 8091, compared to 676,391 Hindus (40.56 per cent) and 982,987 Muslims (58.95 per cent).[20] The increase of Christian converts was absolutely nominal, up 794 from 1891 and 1669 from 1881. The Church of England had the lion's share of converts, 5836 in number, while the Roman Catholic Church had 2172 adherents.[21] Jessore presented a similar demographic picture. Jessore district had a population of 1272 Christians in 1911, up from 912 in 1900.

The number of native Christians was 1220 in 1911, up from 867. This means the total number of official and non-official whites in Jessore was 52 in 1911, up from 45 in 1900. Of the total number of Christians, Baptists made up 307 and Roman Catholics, 902. However, this creates a problem of understanding why the Bengal-Muslim populace felt so deeply threatened by Christian evangelism in the district, especially when they comprised 62 per cent of the population, and numbered 1,087,554 in 1911.[22] Rafiuddin Ahmed accounts this partially to the hurt sentiments and collective pride of the community when even one member was lost to Christian apostasy.[23] The reality seems to have been slightly more complicated. There was historical tension between the white Europeans and the peasantry of Jessore. Since the Jessore market drew large rural crowds, it was also central to displays of disaffection between the local European indigo planters and the peasantry who found it economically untenable to cultivate the crop, making Jessore a flash-point of trouble.

James Wise, in a seminal essay published in 1883, made a series of observations about the relationship between the Muslims and the native Christian converts. Like high-caste Hindus, the Muslims of east Bengal practised rituals of untouchability with regard to Christians. On inadvertently coming in close contact with the person, clothing, or food of the native converts, they would bathe. And if a convert entered their home, they would throw away all cooked food and drinking water. They did not practise similar rituals of taboo with low-caste Hindu neighbours.[24] Educated middle-class Muslims would not sit at the same table with Christians, even with British officials.[25] Wise's observations are borne out by the descriptions Kazi Nazrul Islam left of the so-called 'low-caste' Muslims and the 'Oman-Kathlee' (Roman Catholic) inhabitants of Ranaghat and Krishnanagar in his novel, *Mrityu-Khuda* (Hunger for Death). The novel opens with a confrontation between a Muslim woman and a Christian one, when their daughters manage to contaminate their water pitchers by brushing against each other at the village pond. The Muslim woman, described as Gajal (thin and sharp as a nail), screams at her plump Christian neighbour: '*Haram-khor* Christian from God knows where! It's because you partake of the forbidden meat (pork), that you put on fat like a wild swine, right?' Her neighbour returns with equal salty passion, 'Oh you dried piece of fish! After all, the shine on your face comes from the money your son makes by cooking the same *haram* meat at the house of the British Judge-Sahib!'[26] One of the spectators to this feud, a certain malaria-eaten woman called Pute's Mother can't help interjecting, 'Gajal! Remember, the Judge-Sahib is from our race – we are the race of kings, understand?', thereby asserting moral superiority by drawing a dubious link through a barely shared religious identity between the poor Indians and the British colonial administrators.

In such a society, the visibility of Christian missions, the implicit racial hierarchies practised by the white missionaries and colonial officials, and the explicitly insulting nature of Christian apologetics, especially about the Prophet, created an impression in the Bengali-Muslim ecumene of a much larger threat of Christianity to the true faith. The private but influential support of colonial officials to missionaries was also a visible threat. So was the diffusion of pamphlets and periodicals virulently attacking Islam. The *Islam Pracharak* of September 1891 complained:

> The primary enemies of our religion are the Christians. They spend hundreds of thousands of rupees each year. When there are famines, they lure the wretched sufferers of those regions with promises of aid.[27]

The *Anjuman'e Ettefaq'e Islam* concurred: 'Many of [the peasants] sought sanctuary with the missionaries during the last terrible famine. If the Muslims had money or education that enlightened them to the true glories of Islam, they'd never ever convert to Christianity even if their lives were mortally imperiled.'

Three important factors need to be considered while analysing the cultural spaces of Muslim–Christian apologetics in eastern Bengal during the period of Meherullah's ascendancy. First, Naya Miyan, Dudu Miyan's son and inheritor of the Fara'idi peasant movement, died at the age of thirty-two while on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1884. Naya Miyan had led the last successful charge, politically, economically, and ideologically, against the forces of Hindu *zamindari* extortion of Muslim peasantry.[28] Naya Miyan's death weakened the Fara'idi movement considerably and left a vacuum in the rural Bengali-Muslim ecumene in the sphere of Islamic reform and theological debate.

The second factor had to do with the deep divide between two layers of the Bengali-Muslim *ashraf* or aristocratic classes and the large demographic of the rural peasant community of eastern Bengal's poor Muslims. The first *ashraf* layer was comprised of the great Muslim land-owning families, largely of North Indian aristocratic descent, and living at the urban centres of Calcutta and Dhaka. Almost invariably educated in English, and with closer ties to the elite and sophisticated Perso-Arabicate cultures of northern India, these men also had close ties with the British administration and were largely absentee landlords. From Nawab Abdul Latif to Syed Amir Ali and Chirag Ali, for these men, social reform was structured on the lines of western modernization and political strategy of accommodation, which was later reinforced by the Aligarh Reform movement of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. They had very little direct contact

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with the daily lives and devotions of their poor tenants and *raiyyats*.[29] The second *ashraf* layer of provincial middle-class Bengali Muslims was described by James Wise as practising largely the *sabiqui* or syncretic form of folk Islam, with a reliance on traditional Hindu customary practices.[30] This class, though moderate in its religious beliefs, neither read modern literature or sciences nor sent sons to public schools offering English pedagogy: ' […] both are considered to favor infidelity and skepticism. Science is a sealed book which he has no desire to open, while English and Bengali are foreign languages to him.'[31] This category of Muslim elite came under almost as much fire for apostasy from Meherullah as Muslims converting to Christianity and Christian missionaries, both native and white. His *Vidhava Ganjana o Bishad Bhandar* accuses this group of practices which had no sanction in the Quran or the Hadith.[32]

The main patrons and proponents of the North Indian tradition of *munazara*, or religious debate, emerged from the aristocratic upper and middle classes. However, their counterparts in Bengal had very limited understanding, contact, or even opportunities of conversation with the majority of eastern Bengal's peasant Muslim community, whose languages of intellectual and information exchange and daily practices of devotion were sharply differentiated from the elites of their own community, with very little common ground of experience or religiosity. Whereas a Rahmatullah Kairanawi or a Dr Wazir Khan, not to mention a Syed Ahmed Khan, were just as at home in both Islamic scripture and *tafsir* as at the European exegetical traditions of the Quran, which allowed them to confront missionary evangelical apologetics at a very sophisticated intellectual and theological level, such modes of expression of religious contest were unavailable to most eastern Bengali Muslims.[33] Rural Bengali Muslims lacked the traditions of pedagogical involvement and the socio-cultural vernacular ethos which provided both apologetic disputants and informed audiences of the kind evident during the fabled confrontation between Kairanawi and Carl Pfander at Agra in 1854. There are no comparable figures to Meherullah that I have found in my research of North Indian traditions of *munazara*, and this is partly because his emergence is a direct result of his social and religious milieu.

The third factor was the social and economic changes wrought by the passage of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. After a series of rent strikes, the depositions of the landlords, largely high-caste Hindus, failed to convince the colonial administration of the wisdom of non-interference in the relationship between *raiyyat* and zamindar. The Bengal Tenancy Act invested 'the *raiyyati* layer of the right to the land with substance and security'.[34] One of the major aims of the Fara'idi movement had been the rights to the land for the cultivator. With the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, and a corresponding waning of the zamindar's rent offensive, the Muslim peasantry found a new economic and social stability, even though the late nineteenth century marked the beginning of the appropriation of the peasants' surplus through debt interest rather than rent. The year 1885 was the final closing of a phase of political and economic possibility for the Muslim peasantry and the opportunity for new articulations of rights and reforms. This shift in the domain of material life opened the conditions of possibility for the flowering of new subaltern discourses on religion, culture, social hierarchies, and resistance against suspected efforts at depredations of social cohesion through evangelical Christian missionary activity. The category of reform both most intimately accessible to them and offering the most visible potential for resistance was religion. Christianity and Christian evangelism were viewed with suspicion as tools of erasure of Muslim identity. Munshi Meherullah and his followers, emerging from the social milieu of eastern Bengal's Muslim peasantry, began their work of social reform and defence of Islam against Christian evangelicalism in the unsettled rural Bengal of this period.

The History of Munshi Meherullah

Meherullah's *murid*, Jamiruddin, wrote a short biographical essay on his master and guide after Meherullah's untimely death, parts of which were published in the *Islam Pracharak*. Called *Meher Charit*, the biography is the earliest and most authentic contemporary record of Meherullah's life and labours, and acted as the source material for two subsequent biographies of Meherullah, written by Asiruddin Pradhan of Jalpaiguri and Habibur Rahman.[35] Since these quasi-hagiographic and clearly partisan literary works are our main source of knowledge about Meherullah, the elusiveness of the character and the hypnotic thrall he held his audience in interestingly provide the historian with a portrait of the common man reimagined as hero. Meherullah thus became more than what he was, not only a charismatic self-taught tailor who assumed the role of spokesman for Bengali Muslims, but also an ideologically inscripted cipher holding the key to the Bengali-Muslim *mofussil* milieu and mentality.[36] Meherullah, who, through his writing, had 'defanged the poisonous Christian missionaries and *padris*', was born on 10 Poush 1268, or 24 December 1861, at the home of his maternal uncles in a village called Ghope, in Jessore district.[37] The village where Meherullah spent most of his adult life as social reformer and brilliant anti-Christian apologetist was Chatiantala. Meherullah's father Warisuddin, in

order to educate his son, had Meherullah admitted to a Hindu *pathshala* at the age of five years, where he finished *Barna Parichay*, parts 1 and 2, and started on the Bengali reader *Bodhoday*, written by the great Bengali reformer and educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.[38] Before the young boy could finish *Bodhoday*, Meherullah's father died, impoverishing the family, and there was a temporary break in his education. This was the extent of his formal education in Bengali. After his maternal uncles took on part of the financial responsibilities for him and his three younger sisters, Meherullah's mother encouraged him to begin on a course of religious Islamic studies, hoping that would result in a profitable livelihood. Meherullah went to Karchhia village, to be educated by the Moulavi Ismail Sahib, where he learnt Arabic and Persian, and memorized the Quran and selections from the *Golestan* and *Bustan* of Sa'adi. He also picked up a smattering of Urdu from another teacher, Munshi Moshabuddin of Kayalkhali.[39]

This eclectic and seemingly patchwork education was interesting on two counts: first, the knowledge of Arabic and the Quran in the original was limited to only those Bengalis who received a strictly Islamic education in *madrassas* or belonged to the elite *ashraf* class with closer ties to the vibrant courtly Muslim culture of northern India.[40] The Quran had been translated into Bengali by the Brahmo preacher, Bhai Girish Sen, in three volumes from 1881 to 1886. Mohammad Akram Khan, founder of the Dhaka newspaper, *Azad*, called this feat 'one of the eight wonders of the world'.[41] However, even the Bengali translation was not available to most Bengali Muslims, and the tenets of Islam circulated through *puthi* literature, folk-literature, and fiction, from Syed Sultan's *Nabi Vamsa*[42] (on the family and descendants of Prophet Muhammad) in the sixteenth century to Mir Mosharraf Hosain's novel, *Bishad Sindhu*, published in three volumes in 1885, 1887, and 1891, parts of which were often memorized and then sung in the form of *Jari-Gaan*.[43] Such knowledge of Persian and Arabic, along with a rigorous grounding in the Quran, as Meherullah gained, was rare in his immediate social world. James Wise recorded:

> The vast majority of Bengali Muhammadans are ignorant and simple peasants, who of late years have been casting off the Hindu tinsel which has so long disfigured their religion. They are now taught that to be good *Mussulmans* nothing more is necessary than the repetition, at stated intervals, of certain prayers in a language they cannot understand.[44]

Meherullah's theological training made him an authority figure in his immediate social community while also giving him the means to connect to the elite intellectuals from the metropolises of Calcutta and Dhaka, which he would use to brilliant effect in his aggressive apologetics aimed against Christian evangelism and his social reform programmes in rural east Bengal. At the same time, he remained attuned to the habits and dispositions of the subaltern rural peasant milieu he was part of, and his written work used the *puthi* form and *dobashi*-Bengali to bring sophisticated commentary on Islam to the Bengali Muslims. In his speeches, providing entertainment and education to large audiences, he liberally used verses and couplets from Sa'adi and Hafez in the original Persian, immediately translating them into Bengali, or quotes from the Quran in Arabic, which enhanced the authenticity of his declamations.[45] After John Jamiruddin's re-conversion, one of Meherullah's great feats at combating the baneful effects of missionarism afflicting Bengali Muslims, Meherullah's speeches began to contain references to English *tafsir* or exegesis. He gained access to this powerful pamphlet genre of missionary Christian commentary on the corrupt nature of Islam and the degeneracy of Muslims from Jamiruddin, who had spent time at a Christian seminary in Allahabad.[46] Thus, Meherullah performed an astonishingly effective authenticity that strengthened his status as a uniquely powerful expositor and credible interventionist on religious and cultural matters pertaining to Bengali Muslims. All the three biographers of Meherullah remembered, even decades after his death, the power of his spoken words and his ability to deploy them with devastating effect on both elite educated as well as illiterate rural audiences. Asiruddin Pradhan described Meherullah speaking at one such meeting in Baisakh 1895, held at Noakhali at the town hall, presided over by the district magistrate and attended by the elite Hindus, Muslims as well as colonial officials and Christian missionaries: 'The power and courage of his speech was almost supernatural in its effect, certainly beyond the ability of a human being to describe adequately. People listened to him spellbound, in complete silence and with rapt attention, only to periodically interrupt with cries of "bravo", "*marhabba*" and the thunderous sound of applause.'[47] His fame as a speaker spread enough that he found mention in the Census of India of 1901, through a reference to him by the magistrate of Bogra in 1901. 'In November last, a Muhammadan reformer, Munshi Meherullah of Jessore, was invited by the Hanafis to deliver lectures [...] Excellent lectures on the necessity for reform for the Musalman community.'[48] The effect, as Habibur Rehman witnessed, was intoxicating on his audience. The sincerity of his advice, combined with the authenticity performed and enacted through his intelligent interjection of Arabic and Farsi quotes, made even his detractors take him seriously and reconsider their

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previous positions. 'Those who heard him were never able to forget him or his words. This is the reason that even after almost two decades of his passing, hundreds and thousands of Bengalis have kept hold of his memory in the deepest sanctums of their hearts.'[49]

It was not merely his immediate communitarian affiliations or education that influenced Meherullah's intellectual and social commitments. Direct contact with the forces of colonialism and Christian apologetic evangelicalism sharpened his sense of identity and his understanding of his roots. According to Habibur Rahman, at the end of his Urdu education, Meherullah left Chatiantala and moved to Jessore town in search for a vocation. He trained as a tailor, an occupation that was largely served by Muslims in Bengal, and became apprenticed to a well-known local sewing master called Jahan Baksh Mriddha, who was the family tailor to a white colonial officer's family or 'Saheb-bari'. Being the private supplier of clothing to a 'Saheb-bari' meant that Mriddha had close connections to the European residents of Jessore town – both colonial officials and their families as well as planters and missionaries. As his apprentice, Meherullah gained entry into this network, with ample chances to observe the colonial masters. He also saw, first-hand, the forms in which Christian evangelism worked in the towns and villages of rural Bengal.[50] Asiruddin Pradhan writes of the frenetic evangelical activity in Jessore during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Meherullah had, by this time, gained enough of a clientele (including the favours of the district magistrate, if his hagiographers are to be believed) to open his own shop in the market of Jessore town.[51] A market is, in most societies, a place both of transaction of goods and information, a place that engenders both economic and intellectual commerce. Missionaries had always found marketplaces particularly efficient for large gatherings of people of a wide diversity, who could be preached to and also supplied apologetic pamphlets. The activities of the missionaries touched Meherullah personally:

> Munshi Meherullah's very close friend, Shri Dhanai Biswas was enchanted by the glittering untruths uttered by the missionaries, and abandoned Islam to be baptized as a Christian. Their persuasion and their emphasis that Islam was false, created a storm of unrest in Meherullah's mind, and he almost took the fatal step towards baptism. He was very influenced by the *padri* Ananda Babu's speeches and by reading the many pamphlets that the missionaries distributed.[52]

Meherullah was saved from this misstep and spurred onto his path as a defendant of Islam through his reading of two apologetic pamphlets that contested the claims of the missionaries. These were *Khristian dharm'er bhrastata* or the *Falsehood of Christianity* by Hafiz Niamutullah Ahmed from Kolkata and *Injil'e Hajrat Mohammad'er Khabar Achhhe* or *The Gospel Contains News of Hazrat Mohammad, the Prophet*, written by a Hindu who had subsequently converted first to Christianity and then to Islam, Reverend Babu Ishan Chandra Mondal alias Maulavi Ehsanullah Sahib. As the personal tailor to the district magistrate, Meherullah also made the summer trip to Darjeeling, where he came across the *Mansur-e-Muhammadi*, a short-lived Islamic periodical published from Mysore. He also read a selection of North Indian Muslim apologetic pamphlets refuting the Christian evangelical claims.[53] This close entanglement in the imperial and colonial information networks paradoxically gave him the means to access forms of Islamic apologetic literature that were unavailable to other reformists from his social milieu. This imbued him with a kind of specialist's knowledge of northern-Indian *bahas* and *munazara* performances (but at a textual remove and not as a living tradition), which he selectively refashioned in his own apologetic contests with missionaries, for example in Jessore and Barisal. His activities, thus, were 'emphatically marked by the presence of colonial rule […] ', instead of being complicit in, or simply an ' […] intellectual or social response[s] to colonialism'.[54]

Meherullah was convinced that the only way to stop the depredations of Christian evangelism would be to beat the missionaries at their own game. He began by preaching in the market of Jessore town where his shop was located. This created a sensation, according to Habibur Rahman – the spectacle of the Christian *padri* denouncing Islam and the Prophet on one side of the open marketplace and a young Bengali-Muslim man in worn-out clothes refuting the missionary on the other side was met with astonishment by the buyers, sellers, and loiterers, who carried the tale to their villages and homes. Meherullah had gained a certain amount of fame among his countrymen, and he used this notoriety to not only launch his passionate anti-Christian apologetic propaganda programme, but also to make his presence felt in the many *waz-mahfils* and *milads* which were held as communitarian meetings. In these *mahfils*, Meherullah spoke about the Prophet, His life, and His philosophy – the knowledge of which was the only way to gain and practise true faith or *iman*. And, increasingly, Meherullah spoke of his own conviction that *Din* and *Duniya* could not be considered separately, and a reform of Bengali-Muslim society was necessary to combat not only Christianity, but the rot that had set in from within and left rural Muslims backwards, both in politics and culture.[55]

He wrote his first pamphlet, about 16 quarto pages, called *Khristiya Dharm'er Asarata* or *The Worthlessness of Christianity*, in 1886. It was during

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this early stage of his life as social reformer and apologetist that Meherullah gathered around him a group of like-minded Muslim men, who began to work with him in trying to openly confront Christian evangelism in Jessore district. They managed to attract attention from the Bengali-Muslim press in Calcutta. The *Islam Pracharak*, one of the first newspapers to take notice of the activities of Meherullah and his associates, wrote, 'In Jessore district, the Christian preachers had created a great ruckus – many Muslims, unconscious of their false blandishments, almost chose the path of falsehood. Preachers like Munshi Meherullah, Munshi Mohammad Kasem and others have, through rigorous endeavours, put an end to their efforts.'[56] The influential Pir of Furfura Sharif, Abu Bakr, took interest in Meherullah's activities, and influenced his opinion that the politics of the Hindus could not be the politics of the poor Muslim peasantry.[57] The third and most important addition to his network of communicators, intellectual patrons, and supporters were the members of the *Sudhakar* group of Calcutta. The editors of *Mihir-o-Sudhakar* and later the *Soltan*, Abdur Rahim and Riazuddin Ahmad, the editor of *Islam Pracharak*, contributors like Pandit Riaz-al-Din Ahmad Mashahdi, Sheikh Abdul Rahim, and other leading lights of the Bengali-Muslim intelligentsia came to know of Meherullah through his efforts on behalf of the *Islam Dharmottejika Anjuman*, which organized conferences to debate the state of Muslims in Bengal, around 1886.[58] Meherullah embarked on his career as a contributor and correspondent of the *Sudhakar*, reporting on the open debates or *bahas* between Christian missionaries and Muslim apologetists, including his famous confrontation with the Baptist missionaries Robert Spurgeon and Ishan Mondal on 7 October 1891 in Pirojpur in Barisal. Reports of the confrontation convey a baffling sense of the utter banality of the discussion. A description of the typical mode of these debates is interesting to contemplate. The debate was not one that could be described as theologically acute or intellectually stimulating; Spurgeon asked Meherullah about the nature of Prophet Muhammad's relationship with Allah.

Spurgeon and his associates: Musalmans consider the Nabi Hazrat Muhammad as the Friend of Allah. If Hazrat Muhammad was indeed a friend of Allah, why was his immediate family, indeed his dearest grandsons Hassan and Hussein made to suffer inglorious death in the great battle of Karbala?

> Munshi Meherullah: The compassion and sympathy shown by the *Padri* towards the family of our Prophet is truly worth our gratitude. When the Rasul went to speak to Allah of the premonition of terrible tragedies that were to befall his family, Allah said sadly, "Friend, here you are weeping for your grandchildren, but see, those Christians have crucified my dear son Jesus. What can I do, the *padris* have stolen all my powers!"[59]

The sly humour used to combat the assertion of the Christian missionaries is striking – so is the subtle accusation against the *padris* that their false statements about both Allah and His Prophet were issues of grievous insult and injury to the psyche of rural Bengali Muslims. This is not a complicated theological debate on the minutiae of the Quran or the Bible in their respective portrayals of Muhammad and Jesus in the tradition of the North Indian *munazara* – it is, rather, a quick-witted spontaneous repartee that would disarm and silence his interlocutors and provide entertainment to his audience. This impertinent use of laughter derailed the fundamental seriousness of the missionary endeavour of creating a religious hierarchy based on a comparative truth-value of greatness assigned to the chief personages of each religion. But this laughter, and the resultant discomfiture of the missionaries, is also a moment of the disruption of the unofficial colonial civilizing mission which was to be achieved through displays of both power and piety. It could also be a gesture emphasizing the fruitlessness of such encounters – a true Musalman, who knew the Quran, would never be swayed by such questions from Christian evangelicals. The *Islam Pracharak*, in its first published issue, reported in detail on the Pirojpur debate-meeting, claiming that it attracted close to four hundred people.[60]

A similar *bahas* was later held in Ranaghat in March 1897. The local Muslims complained to Meherullah that the town was one of the main seats of missionary power, since Reverend Monroe, the director of the Ranaghat Medical Mission, misled people into converting to Christianity in order to save their souls, when all they wanted was material help from the Ranaghat Dispensary to save their bodies. Monroe had also offended the Muslims on previous occasions by writing or distributing pamphlets that suggested, in short order, that Hazrat Muhammad Rasulullah was a fraud, a cheater, and a licentious person, while also saying that 'Islam was not a religion of men but of pigs' – a grievous insult.[61] Meherullah arrived to a gathering of thousands, with a substantial police force having been deployed to keep the peace. The atmosphere was tense with anticipation. Though the meeting was held in a mango orchard a few hundred feet from the Ranaghat Dispensary, Monroe and his associates failed to turn up, possibly because they did not want the event to tip over into violence, maybe because they knew by then the way Meherullah handled theological debates with Christian missionaries and just did not

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want to be made fools of in public. Whatever the reason for the absence might be, the audience was deeply disappointed. Meherullah soothed his fractious listeners by giving a seven-hour-long speech. This event was the last open *debate* between Christian missionaries and Muslim apologetists in Bengal, though the argument continued in periodicals and pamphlets.

Meherullah's characteristic apologetics against Christian evangelism translated into the print medium with vibrancy and humour. His *Jawabunnesara* or *Answers* to major theological questions used by the missionaries in an effort to critique Islam, written in 1898, took the form of a dialogue between a Christian missionary and himself.[62] One of the questions directed attention towards the fact that there were no easily available Bengali translations of the Quran. As such, wasn't it fruitless to read the words of Allah by rote in a language that the *namazi* could not hope to comprehend? As one can imagine, this was a deeply Protestant Christian concern about the comprehensibility of the Holy Word, but also served as a direct attack on the nature of Muslim piety in Bengal. Meherullah in answer used the rhetoric of practical common sense. In riverine Eastern Bengal, many hundreds of men and women bought tickets printed in English for boats and steamers, not knowing the language or what it meant for their journey, and still had faith that they would reach their destinations. Was it not evident that Allah and the *alims* would steer the devout Muslims on the path of piety even if they couldn't read the Quran in Arabic?[63] In a way, Meherullah's career exhibits a strange dichotomy in that his charisma operated in the cause of reformist social and religious activism by using forms and rhetorical instruments of the 'economy of enchantments' used by practitioners of customary Islam in rural eastern Bengal. At the same time, the content of his lectures and speeches prohibitively proscribed any belief in miracles or saintly intermission in the lives of the Muslim peasantry. Depending on a strict interpretative understanding of the Quran and the role of religion in creating the reformed subject of ideal Bengali Muslims, Meherullah in his subtle way made fun of the Christian missionaries when they tried to argue superiority over Jesus's ability to perform miracles.[64] The tract that brought him even more fame, the *Radde Kristian o Dalilol Islam* of 1898, an improved and expanded version of his *The Fallacy of Christianity* written in 1886, made a point of criticizing not only Christian evangelism, but also the listlessness of Bengalis and the moribund nature of their social life bereft of any desire for progress.[65] He often compared missionaries and converted Muslims to bats – creatures of the night, blind to the nature of the truth of Islam.

For an example of his quick-witted response to common questions posed to Muslim apologetists by Christian missionaries, in this case on the fundamental issue of a Trinitarian understanding of the Christian Godhead and the nature of Jesus's divinity, Meherullah took a different position, once again inflected not by theological intricacy, but by blunt common sense. He said:

> Jesus called on God as Father through his devotion, and in this devotion, he saw everyone else, including his disciples, as a brotherhood, united in a common faith. A simple, discerning reader can comprehend immediately that this was not a paternal bond made on claims of inheritance. We Muslims only legally accept that bond as paternal which is one of blood, between a sire and his progeny, though out of common courtesy, we do refer to our elders as our fathers sometimes. Such faith, devotion or courtesy does not imply a right of inheritance either of blood or of spiritual and worldly riches, between he who is addressed as father, and he who calls upon the other with that name. As such, we cannot accept the missionary contention that Jesus was, in essence, divine as the truly begotten Son of God.[66]

As should be clear from the extract, which finds a very homely explanation to disprove the divinity of Jesus, at every stage of his career, Meherullah's rhetorical stance was to approach religion as a part of the lived life of the rural Bengali-Muslim community. This stance did not shift, even though his theological acuity can be gauged by his sophisticated elisions of the finer points of theological debate that the Christian missionaries practised.

Language of Truth, Language of Belonging: Bengali-Muslim Apologetics and Bengali Identity

All available sources on Meherullah's life and times stress the pivotal importance of his debate with Reverend John Jamiruddin, who reconverted to Islam as a result and was thereafter known as Meherullah's devoted disciple, Sheikh Jamiruddin Vidyabinod. Jamiruddin was the obverse image of Meherullah in many ways and represented the cautionary tale of the effects of Christian evangelical glamour cast on hapless Muslims. The narrative of Jamiruddin's life, managed very carefully by Jamiruddin himself, reads very much like a sentimental novel, where the protagonist goes astray, comes into contact with a heroic figure who challenges his sinful waywardness. As a result, the prodigal comes back onto the straight and narrow path of religious fidelity, and is joyously accepted back into the fold. Unlike Meherullah, Jamiruddin was born into a prosperous middle-class Musalman family, one of seven brothers. His father Amiruddin was an orthodox man given to performing religious rituals. Amiruddin admitted his son to a *maktab*, instead of a *pathshala*,

where the young Jamiruddin went through a rigorous grounding in Islamic theology, the Quran in Arabic, and the forms and rituals of reading *namaz* prayers. After a short stint of learning at Amjhupi Christian School, he was sent to Krishnanagar in 1885 to study at the Normal. There, Jamiruddin came into contact with Christian missionaries, especially Reverend Jani (Johnny) Ali, a Cambridge-educated Muslim convert to Christianity. Jamiruddin's description of his own conversion shows very clearly that his family members were devastated. His first attempt at baptism failed in 1885, when his parents learned of his intentions and his father and elder brothers brought him home from school. However, this was only a temporary delay, as Jamiruddin, 'causing my parents and brothers unimaginable sorrow, was baptized on the afternoon of 25 December 1887 and entered the community of Christians'.[67] Through the encouragement of Reverend Johnny Ali and others, Jamiruddin developed an interest in being a native preacher and was sent to train at the St Paul's Divinity College in Allahabad, which was under the administration of Reverend T. V. French of the CMS mission (and aide of Pfander in the 1854 Agra *munazara*), later to be Bishop of Lahore, and grandfather of the Catholic revivalist Monsignor Ronald Knox. Jamiruddin performed very well in the seminary and received a thorough grounding in Hebrew, Greek, Sanskrit, Christian theology, as well as, understandably, in what was called 'Mohammedan controversies' – which were exegeses on the Quran by oriental scholars like Carl Pfander, William Muir, and W. W. Hunter.[68] Exactly at the time that Meherullah was coming into his own as a defendant of Islam against Christianity, Jamiruddin was embarking on his career as a native convert missionary.

Jamiruddin and Meherullah's paths finally crossed, metaphorically, in 1892, when Jamiruddin was still a student at St Paul's in Allahabad. He wrote an essay in the Bengali periodical *Khristian Bandhab* or *Friend of Christians*. The article was called *Asal Koran Kothai?* or *Where is the Real Quran?* Meherullah answered the question in passionate, almost vitriolic fashion, in a series of articles published in five instalments in the *Sudhakar* periodical in 1892. The first essay, a direct answer to Jamiruddin, was named *Sarbattrai Asal Koran* or *The True Quran is Everywhere: Revealing the Isai or Christian Fraud*. The argument turned on the authenticity of the words in the Quran, and the possibility of apocryphal additions or deletions. The Quran, Jamiruddin had stressed, was just as liable to charges of corruption, of *tahrif-i lafzi* – a lesser version of the true words of God that could be found incorruptible in the Bible. He was actually turning the arguments of Rahmatullah Kairanawi, during his momentous debate with Carl Pfander in Agra in 1854, on its head. This was not a new argument. The 'People of the Book' or *Ahl-e-Kitab* were said to have received grace through divine revelation, but Christian missionaries in India, beginning with Carl Pfander onwards, had stressed that there were degrees of authenticity in the reception of the revelations. To theological hair-splitters like Pfander and his ilk, the issue of Muhammad's illiteracy, the mistakes or elisions that might have been made by the many *Huffaz* in memorizing (*hifz*) and noting down the Prophet's words, and the alterations made to the Quran and the Hadith due to the Muslim sectarian split between the Shi'as and Sunnis, created insuperable difficulties in ascertaining the truth-value of Islamic Revelation – which immediately gave hierarchical supremacy to the Bible.[69]

Meherullah's article begins with a direct personal attack on Jamiruddin, laying bare his intellectual debts and his scholarly pretensions. Meherullah used 'Shuddha Bangla' or chaste Bengali in the articles, the choice of the Calcutta elite, not the *dobashi*-Bengali he used in the pamphlets for wider dissemination in rural eastern Bengal. Nonetheless, the insults were very much in the vein of his speeches – he called the work that of a senseless boy, a pointless regurgitation of previous work by Pfander and an attempt at gaining the favour and approbation of Jamiruddin's white masters. In doing so, Meherullah betrayed profound knowledge of the Muslim apologetic movement of northern India. He reminded Jamiruddin that he was wasting Meherullah's time – all the objections that could be raised against the Christian exegesis of the Quran's corruptibility had already been pointed out by Maulana Rahmatullah Kairanawi in his *Izhar ul-Haq* (*The Truth Revealed*), the thorough refutation of Pfander's *Mizan-ul-Haq* (*The Balance of Truth*).[70] Meherullah adopts a pose of passionate disapproval of the attempt by a fellow Bengali ex-Musalman to try to bring the sanctity of the Quran into disrepute: 'It is the cowardice and slothful lethargy of Bengali Muslims that results in such unbearable audacity going unpunished.'[71]

Jamiruddin had no answer to this eloquent defence of the Quran, and this created a tumult in his heart. However, it still took him almost three more years to renounce Christianity, and the path he followed is illuminative of the extraordinary religious ferment in Bengal during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. His study of the Bengali Quran, translated by Bhai Girish Sen, created the firm impression in his mind that the Gospels had undergone change, not the Quran. Instead, it came to him like an epiphany ('A voice spoke in my ear', he says in his autobiography) that Isa's comment, that the Prophet to follow him would be called Ahmad, had been intentionally removed from the Bible by the evil Christians.[72] He was disturbed, and his faith in Christianity suffered a further blow. He

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turned for a while to the study of Brahmo theology and concentrated on books written by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen – he went to Calcutta hoping to be converted to Brahmoism. It was there that he heard a lecture by the Brahmo preacher Nagendranath Mitra (*sic*), who spoke at the Albert Hall on 'Muhammad and his Religion', a Carlylian exposition refuting the false charges of licentiousness on the Prophet by Christian missionaries. The lecture affected Jamiruddin deeply. He read exhaustively on Islamic apologetic works in Bengali, including Meherullah's *Radde Khristian o Dalilol Islam* or *Refutation of Christianity and Evidence of Islam*, mentioned before, as well as the *Eslam Tattva* or *The Essence of Islam*, written by two members of the *Sudhakar* group, who were also Meherullah's associates, Mohammed Riazuddin Ahmad and Sheikh Abdur Rahim. He finally resigned his missionary work, returned home, and reconverted in front of his joyous family. However, his neighbours and villagers were not quite as ready to believe he had had a change of heart, or to forgive him his previous transgression of having committed apostasy. As a result, he was made 'Ek-ghore' or outcast from his community for ritual infractions, and ran up a huge debt. It was at this time that he reached out to Meherullah. For Meherullah, Jamiruddin's reconversion was both a personal and political landmark in his efforts to curb the influence of Christian missionaries and Christianity in eastern Bengal, an event that further raised public estimation of the effectiveness of his social reform programme and of his own personal charisma. Meherullah was happy to hear of Jamiruddin's return to the fold, immediately took him under his wings, and paid off his debts.[73]

Conclusion

Meherullah's actions remain opaque to the historian if studied within the rigid categories of reform, modernity, and colonialism. He affected clear disinterest in open debate with his missionary interlocutors in *bahas* meetings, deferring their theological enquiries with a joke, a folk-tale, a recitation from a Persian poem, using sly civility, laughter, and an almost parable-like use of everyday practices. There are two reasons for his socio-linguistic performances. One, the very act of engagement with the colonially and racially inflected and predetermined theological debate between Christian missionaries and Muslim *alims* was, Meherullah understood, merely a performance of social, racial, and theological superiority. The outcome of such debates was always undecided and indefinitely deferred because apparent victory for any one side was completely unacceptable, at the peril of their very souls and identities, to the other side. Meherullah cut through the dense minutiae of arid scriptural thicket and made the contest merely about demonstrations of superior wit before a deeply partisan audience, usually predisposed towards him. This strategy was also an effective way to disconcert the missionaries, who traditionally based their salvos against Islam only after a thorough study of both the Quran and the *tafsir* literature. Deprived of this common ground, they floundered at Meherullah's sly challenges to their textual authority. The narrative of the self-taught tailor's moral and exegetical victory over the educated young native Christian convert may also be read as a coded triumph of Indian forms of knowledge over colonial texts of power. In such literature, Islam and Christianity were coded hierarchically as indigenous knowledge and colonial modern pedagogy, the values of which were decided by weighing textual purity. The struggle of establishing Jesus or Mohammad as the greater or truer prophet was also a struggle of the definition of the Bengali-Muslim self as an authentic and immutable category. Two, the dialectical connections between Muslim intellectuals and the subaltern Bengali-Muslim ecumene are laid bare in all their complexity when viewed through the lens of apologetic pamphlets and periodical literature. In such a reading, the discourse of nationhood and religious identity emerges as a story of everyday resistance to the high-caste Hindu or Brahmo understanding of the category of the poor Muslim peasant that elided the pluralistic religious complexities and political differences of a large section of Bengal's Muslim population. As Dipesh Chakrabarty says in a different context, this was a challenge to the aesthetic reduction of the political and removing it from the historical time.[74] The distinctive approach of Meherullah towards social reform, religion, and religious identity played a very important role in defining self and other in Bengal, with important consequences. Defining the parameters of being a good and true Muslim demarked the lines of political and social agitation, where religion and social capital were interwoven, proximate, and omnipresent strands. Religious conversion as threat or fact, became a *techne*, a phronetic device that operated in excess of the real boundaries of its perceived threats, to enable self-examination and analysis of one's immediate social milieu, in order to resist the material lucrativeness of religious and political subordination, and to bring about reform from within. Meherullah, with his capacity to travel across networks of information exchange, from the elite *ashraf* circles of the *Sudhakar* in Calcutta to the *bahas* and *waz-mahfils* of the villages and mofussil towns of rural Bengal, complicates our notions of who could speak for the community and the nation. In fact, Meherullah's imagined community, imagined against Christianity and colonialism, opens up an interesting arena of processual understanding for rights and for definitions of categories of identities. He was an interlocutor of his social milieu, mediating between the present and the past in a voice that could not be drowned out by the larger intellectual currents of teleological structures of

nationalist historiography – possessing what Ranajit Guha called 'the small voice[s] of history', recovered from the ruins of the vernacular pasts.[75]

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. L.S.S. O'Malley, *Jessore District Gazetteers*(Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1912), p. 45.
2. Excerpt printed in Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja* (Ḍhākā: Isalāmika Phāunḍeśana Bāṃlādeśa, 1983), pp. 204–05; translation from Bengali mine.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Rafiuddin Ahmed,'Muslim-Christian Polemics and Religious Reform in 19th Century Bengal: Munshi Meher'ullah of Jessore', in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. by Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), pp. 94–96. The veteran civil surgeon James Wise's classic article divided the Muslims of Eastern Bengal in these three groups along with the *Rafi'yadain*, who he called the 'real Wahabbis' of Bengal. According to Wise, the sects differed 'in many important particulars, but especially in their sentiments regarding Christianity', which was a major cause of disunity. See James Wise, 'The Mohammadans of Eastern Bengal', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 63 (1894), 28–63 (p. 33).
5. *Waz-mahfil*: propagatory meetings. *Bahas*: debate, especially to discuss religious and sectarian theological issues.
6. For an in-depth discussion of the term 'ecumene', its relationship to religious polemics between Hindu, Muslim, and Christian theologists, and its use in the context of the emergent colonial public sphere in India, see C. A. Bayly, 'The Indian Ecumene: An Indigenous Public Sphere', in *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 180 –211.
7. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, see the chapter on 'Parables Told by Munshi Sahib', pp. 83–92.
8. <http://www.amarboi.com/2015/11/bishad-sindhur-bishadmoy-torongo-abul-bashar.html> [accessed 24 November 2015]. Bashar says, 'My grandmother summarized the narrative exposition of the events of Karbala in Puthi-literature, folk-songs and oral renditions in two words – *Zehar/Qahar* – poison and cursed affliction (or calamity). Hassan was poisoned. Hossein died afflicted of thirst, unlawfully assassinated. The description in the book was heart-rending – even more so when I listened to it being spoken or sung. Listening to the story brought tears unchecked in my eyes, in my childhood.'
9. Mustafa Nur'ul Islam (ed.), *Samayik-patr'e jiban o janamat* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977), p. 95.
10. *Ibid*., pp. 110–11. Meherullah wrote a pamphlet poignantly chronicling the state of poor young Muslim and Hindu widows, barred from all the joys of the world – *Vidhava Ganjana o Bishad Bhandar*. The seventh edition copy that survives in the Dhaka University Library's Rare Books section was published by Meherullah's youngest son, Mokhlesar Rahman. The introduction points out that most prostitutes in the Nadia district turned out to be Muslim widows coerced into the oldest trade on earth.
11. Originally from Sheikh Jamiruddin's *Meher Charit*, which was the earliest biography of Meherullah. Quoted in Ahmed, 'Muslim-Christian Polemics', p. 265.
12. Islam (ed.), *Samayik-patr'e jiban o janamat*, p. 111.
13. Munshi Meherullah, *Radde Khr̥shṭāna o dalilula Isalāma, ba, Khr̥shṭāna dharmera asāratā* (Dhaka: Āñjumāne Tāmarinula Musalimina (Musalima Anuśīlana Saṃsthā), repr. 1976), pp. 2–5.
14. Quoted in Abul Ahsan Chaudhuri, *Munshi Sheikh Jamiruddin* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1953), p. 15; translation mine.
15. *Ibid*., Chap. 4, 'Public Health', pp. 57–66.
16. *Ibid*., Chap. 14, 'Christian Missions', p. 145.

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17. *Ibid*., Chap. 13, ‘Education’, p. 134.
18. Chaudhuri, *Munshi Sheikh Jamiruddin*, pp. 14–16.
19. *Ibid*., p. 14. Chaudhuri mentions the district magistrate of Meherpur donating a substantial sum to the Church Missionary Society’s funds in 1904.
20. J.H.E. Garrett. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Nadia*, (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1910), Chap. 3, 'The People', p. 44.
21. *Ibid*., p. 52.
22. *Ibid*., p. 56.
23. Ahmed, ‘Muslim-Christian Polemics’, pp. 97–98.
24. James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*(London: Her Majesty’s printer Harrison and Sons, 1883), p. 44.
25. *Ibid*., p. 45.
26. See Kazi Nazrul Islam, *Mrityu-Khuda*, 4th edn (Calcutta: Gopaldas Publishers, 1958), p. 4.
27. Islam (ed.), *Samayik-patr’e jiban o janamat*, p. 95. *Isa’i Din* is the religion of Isa Masih or Jesus the Messiah.
28. Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Fara’idi Movement in Bengal, 1818–1906*(Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society Publication No. 41, 1965), pp. 50–56.
29. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, p. 28: ‘The Muhammadan revival of the nineteenth century is one of the most momentous events in the modern history of India […] from its threatening to become a political movement, having for its object the overthrow of the Christian government by a Muhammadan one, with the Koran and the sword as the leading agents of civilisation. The seed sown by a few earnest untitled men, has borne abundant fruit, and at the present day overshadows the whole of Eastern Bengal […] a movement unsupported by the landlords, or the richer classes, and discouraged by the State, spread far and wide, embracing the large majority of the agricultural and manufacturing classes […]’
30. Mir Mosharraf Hossein belonged to this group, and his *Bishad-Sindhu* is a product of this syncretic vernacular religious and social ethos.
31. *Ibid*., pp. 42–44. ‘In the society of strangers he is polite and lavish of praise; but he seldom visits, sits at the table, or partakes of food with Christians, as was the invariable custom a century ago. It is melancholy to contemplate the present state of the better classes of Muhammadans, for with many excellent traits of character, they have no energy or ambition left. Instead of adapting themselves to the changes of modern civilization, they listen to tales of ignorant Faqirs, or to sedition taught by fanatical Maulavis, and lament that the days of ‘Alamgir, and of Mussulman supremacy, have passed away. The young are growing up in idleness and ignorance; the old wasting their lives by debauchery, intemperance, and opium’; emphasis mine.
32. Munshi Mohammed Meherullah, *Vidhava Ganjana o Bishad Bhandar* (Chudamonkati, Jessore: Munshi Mokhlesar Rahman, 1968), pp. 5–7.
33. Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993); see chapter, ‘Open Conflict in Agra: The “Great Debate” of 1854’.
34. Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 81.
35. (a) Shaikh Jamiruddin, *Meher Charit*, 7th edn (Jessore, 1967).
    (b) Mohammed Asiruddin Pradhan, *Meherulla’r Jibani* (Jalpaiguri: Printed by M.L. Datta at Jalpaiguri Press, 1909).
    (c) Sheikh Habibur Rahman (Sahityaratna), *Karmabir Munshi Meherullah* (Calcutta: Muhammadi Press, 1934).
36. Following John and Jean Comaroff, describing life history as ‘patently ideological modes of inscription’, quoted in David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
37. Sheikh Jamiruddin, *Meherul Islam*, 7th edn (Jessore, 1967), p. 9. Quoted in Muhammada Ābū Tāliba. *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja* (Ḍhākā: Isalāmika Phāuṇḍeśana Bāṃlādeśa, 1983). p. 23.
38. *Barna Parichay*, Parts 1 and 2, were written in 1854 and 1855. *Bodhoday* was written in 1851.
39. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, Chap. 1.
40. For an in-depth discussion of *akhlaq* literature, see Muzaffar Alam, ‘Sharia, Akhlaq and Governance’, in *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200–1800* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2004), Chap. 2.
41. Quoted in David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 353, note 89.
42. Ayesha A. Irani, *Sacred Biography, Translation, and Conversion ; The Nabīvaṃśa of Saiyad Sultān and the Making of Bengali Islam, 1600-Present* (2011). Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations. <http://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/467> [accessed 24 November 2015]. She discusses how the *Navi Vamsa* became the prime source of knowledge about Islam and the Prophet in Bengal, and often provided a template for other

authors working on Islamic themes, especially on *sirat* literature.

43. For a detailed discussion, see the seminal work: Anisujjamana, *Musalimamānasa O Bāṃlā Sāhitya* (Dhaka: Lekhak Sangha Prakasani, 1964), pp. 234–39. Saymon Zakaria has found evidence of *Bishad Sindhu* being adapted into cycles of Jari-Gaan in Netrakona district. See Sāimana Jākāriẏā, *Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh*, 1st edn (Dhaka: Nymphea Publication, 2011), pp. 31–44. The author Abul Bashar writes poignantly of the many ways of reading, listening to, and loving the novel in rural peasant and middle-class Hanafi Muslim communities in Bengal <http://www.amarboi.com/2015/11/bishad-sindhur-bishadmoy-torongo-abul-bashar.html> [accessed 24 November 2015]. Bashar says, 'In my childhood I saw pious Muslims display *Bishad Sindhu* in bamboo caskets specially used for storing religious texts with other books.'
44. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, p. 44.
45. For details, see Rahman, 'Mohd. Meherullah the Orator', in.*Karmabir Munshi Meherullah*, Chap. 4.
46. See Chaudhuri, *Munshi Sheikh Jamiruddin*, pp. 17–19. Jamiruddin studied at St Paul's Divinity College in Allahabad and graduated with a first-class Bachelor of Theology or B.Th degree, with added honours as HGR or High Grade Reader.
47. Pradhan, *Meherulla'r Jibani*, pp. 13–14; translation mine.
48. *Census of India, Vol. 1*, of 1901, Chap. 4, 'Religions', Sec. 318, p. 175. The section in full:
    A sort of *Bahas* (religious controversy) took place recently at Jamalganj between the Hanafis and the Rafi-yadains which ended with the use of most filthy language by both parties. Since then each party is trying to outbid the other. In November last a Muhammadan reformer, Munshi Meherullah of Jessore, was invited by the Hanafis to deliver lectures on the superiority of the Muhammadan religion in general, and more especially on that of the Hanafi doctrine. The Munshi, however, delivered excellent lectures on the necessity for reform of the Musalman community and gave offence to none. I mention this as it indicates that the present reformers of the community are actuated by a conciliatory spirit.
    Also quoted in Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal, 1884–1912* (Dacca: S. Ahmed, distributed by Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 311.
49. Rahman, *Karmabir Munshi Meherullah*, pp. 46–48; translation mine.
50. Rahman, *Karmabir Munshi Meherullah*, pp. 17–18.
51. Pradhan, *Meherulla'r Jibani*, p. 9.
52. *Ibid*., pp. 9–10; translation mine. Ananda Babu may have been the well-known missionary Ananda Chandra Duffadar of Jhenaidah (village near Meherullah's home in Chatiantala. In a report to the Society in London, Duffadar commented on the sorry state of the Baptist Mission's conversion efforts in Jessore – they only had forty-seven members in full standing. For details, see Gordon Soddy, *Baptists in Bangladesh: An Historical Sketch of More than One Hundred Years' Work of the Baptist Missionary Society in Bengal* (Khulna, Bangladesh: Literature Committee, National Council of Churches, Bangladesh, 1987), p. 61.
53. Rahman, *Karmabir Munshi Meherullah*, p. 20.
54. Anne M. Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 201. Blackburn makes this differentiation in her analysis of Buddhist apologetic responses to Christian evangelism in late nineteenth and twentieth century Ceylon.
55. *Ibid*., pp. 22–24.
56. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, p. 27.
57. Anisujjamana. *Musalimamānasa O Bāṃlā Sāhitya*, p. 354.
58. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, p. 28.
59. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, pp. 44–45; translation mine.
60. *Ibid*., pp. 43–48.
61. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, pp. 49–50. Talib claims that these events were verified by Meherullah's youngest son, Mokhlesar Rahman. The description is slightly different in Habibur Rahman, who makes no mention of Monroe's incendiary comments on the Prophet.
62. Munshi Meherullah, *Jawabunnesara or Exchanges of Questions and Answers with Christians* (Dhaka: Muslim Anushilan Sanstha, 1898), Dhaka University Rare Books Section, 2970023 MEJ.
63. Munshi Meherullah, *Jawabunnesara*.
64. I use the term following Nile Green's coinage. See Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 18. Meherullah used a stricter textual analysis of both the Quran and the Bible in his *Radde Khr̥shṭāna* to establish that performing miracles was solely the attribute of Allah Himself, and not lesser beings, who were the vessels through which such miraculous works *(Mauzeja)* were

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made evident. Thus, performance of miracles was not a true signifier of divinity. See Meherullah, *Radde Khr̥shṭāna o dalilula Isalāma, ba, Khr̥shṭāna dharmera asāratā*, pp. 25–29.

65. Meherullah, *Radde Khr̥shṭāna o dalilula Isalāma, ba, Khr̥shṭāna dharmera asāratā*, p. 2.
66. *Ibid*., pp. 37–40. Meherullah quoted from the *Parashar Samhita* to strengthen his case against the divine paternity of Jesus!
67. Quoted in Chaudhuri, *Munshi Sheikh Jamiruddin*, p. 26.
68. *Ibid*., pp. 25–27.
69. For details on interactions between Muslims and missionaries in pre-Mutiny India, see Avril Powell's seminal book: Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1993), pp. 132–57. Also note Seema Alavi's discussion of the 1854 debate, in Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 171–73.
70. Avril Powell, 'New Focus on Islam: The Reverend Carl Pfander and the *Mizan-ul-Haq*', *in Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*, Chap. 5.

    A summation of the controversy could also be widely accessed through William Muir's book. Sir William Muir, *The Mohammedan Controversy: Biographies of Mohammed, Sprenger on Tradition, The Indian Liturgy, and the Psalter* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897).
71. Muhammada Ābū Tāliba, *Munaśī Mohāmmada Meheraullāha, deśa, kāla, samāja*, pp. 170–82.
72. Chaudhuri, *Munshi Sheikh Jamiruddin*, pp. 26–28.
73. *Ibid*., p. 29.
74. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Nation and Imagination', in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, new edn (Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), Chap. 6.
75. Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays* (Ranikhet/Bangalore: Permanent Black, distributed by Orient Blackswan, 2009).

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